

The roles conscientiousness and communication play in organizational commitment to change

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About the Author

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the effect of conscientiousness on Organizational Commitment to Change (OCC) and the impact of formal and informal communication on OCC. Two hundred and four employees from a financial institution completed on-line questionnaires measuring personality, OCC (Affective, Normative & Continuance), and communication (formal & informal). The study evidences a negative relationship between conscientiousness and Continuance Commitment to Change (CCC). It reveals formal communication is a stronger predictor of OCC compared to informal communication. The study is also interested in how communication methods affect the relationship between conscientiousness and OCC. The findings of this study inform management to give due consideration to both formal communication and individuals' levels of conscientiousness when planning and implementing organizational change.

Introduction

Organizational change is often used as an approach to increasing organizational effectiveness by reconfiguring components within an organization (Ott, 1996). Change is an ever-present feature of organizational life nowadays; and the ability to facilitate successful change has become a requirement to survive and succeed in today's highly competitive and continuously evolving business environment (By, 2005). Yet, many academics and practitioners suggest that up to 70 per cent of organizational changes fail to achieve their objectives (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Keller & Aiken, 2009; Kotter, 2008; Pettigrew, 2000). Many change scholars (Fedor, Caldwell & Herold 2006; Ford, Weissbein & Plamondon, 2003; Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Vakola, Tsaousis & Nikolaou, 2004) argue that among different factors, Organizational Commitment to Change (OCC) is one of the most crucial factors to successful change. Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) define OCC as 'a driving force that binds an individual to take any necessary course of action for the successful implementation of a change initiative' (p.475). The idea is that OCC goes beyond a positive attitude toward change as it contains not only a supportive intention but also a readiness to make sacrifices to achieve specific change goals. People who are motivated to achieve a goal they are committed to, tend to try harder and are less willing to give up (Latham & Locke, 1979). Conner (1992) also suggests that OCC is the glue between employees and change goals. By acknowledging the importance of OCC, this paper draws its focus on factors that facilitate employees' OCC and ultimately reduce resistance among employees (Barnard & Stoll, 2011).

Based on employees' different motivations during their participation in organizational change, Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) identify three types of OCC, namely Affective Commitment to Change (ACC), Continuance Commitment to Change (CCC) and Normative Commitment to Change (NCC).

ACC reflects a positive emotional attachment and a willingness to fully engage with the change because of the potential benefits it brings to both individual and the organization (Bouckenooghe, Schwarz & Minbashian, 2015).

NCC is related to an individual's feeling of obligation to be supportive in the change process. It mirrors the internal normative pressure to support change because of the potential contribution to meeting the organizational interests and goals (Bouckenooghe et al., 2015).

CCC is an individual's recognition of the perceived costs and risks associated with their resistance to change. It captures a very different motivation of supporting change. The underlying idea of CCC is associated with the idea of side bets. This means that if the individual does not support change they would lose their side bet (Boucke-nooghe et al., 2015).

These three types of OCC were built on Meyer & Allen's (1991) Organizational Commitment model. Here, OC is 'a mind set or psychological state' that is 'not restricted to organizational value and goal' (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p.62). It reflects 'a desire, a need and/or an obligation to maintain membership in the organization' (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p.62). It is important to note that, although the concept of OCC was built from OC, OC does not necessarily lead to OCC. Therefore, Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) call for additional attention to be placed on Organizational Commitment (OC) in the change context.

Following this appeal, there is a growing literature on affective commitment to change in relation to employees' perception of change, change implementation and turnover rate associated with change (Cunningham, 2006; Parish, Cadwellader & Busch, 2008). Other facilitators of OCC such as trust in the top-level management, ability to cope with change, and participation in the change process have also been found to have a positive impact on successful organizational change. Fuller and Marler (2009) point out that individual facilitators play an important role in employees' OCC. Building on this distinction, this paper aims to illuminate the relationships between the three types of OCC and other individual level facilitator—personality, in organizational change.

Personality traits are seen to have a positive impact on individual success and organization advancement (Panaccio & Vandenberghe, 2012). Studies show that people with a higher locus of control (Chen & Wang, 2007) and openness to change (Chalwa & Kelloway, 2004; Cunningham, 2006; Herold, Fedor, & Caldwell, 2007) are more likely to commit to change. Panaccio and Vandenberghe (2012) compare five personality traits with three types of OCC finding significant relationships between agreeableness and ACC and CCC. This is particularly true for those personality factors that reflect a willingness to change, such as openness to experience and agreeableness (Chawla & Kelloway, 2004). Other personality factors such as conscientiousness have received

less attention in studies of OCC; but some evidence exists. For instance, Schappe (1998) suggests that conscientiousness has significant impact on OC. Vakola et al. (2004) also find a positive relationship between conscientiousness and employees' attitudes toward change; suggesting employees showing higher conscientiousness are more likely to engage in positive attitudes towards the organization and the change process. Therefore, this study is interested to see the impact of conscientiousness on employees' ACC, NCC and CCC.

Communication is another important antecedent likely to facilitate employees' OC and reduce resistance toward change (Chawla & Kelloway, 2004). Communication is much more than sending a message to recipients. It aims to achieve a fully reciprocal understanding between two or more people (Page, 1984). Communication has been previously examined alongside OC in some studies (Barrett, 2002; Elving, 2005). These studies highlight that many organizational change programmes failed because of shortages in communication highlighting the need to emphasise the role of communication in organizational change processes. Meyer and Allen (1997) argue communication creates a pre-condition for CCC as the purpose of communication is to provide information in relation to changes affecting employees. In particular, information about visions and goals at the beginning of change will allow employees to engage in the change process. Such information is often communicated through formal bureaucratic communication channels from senior management (Postmes, Tanis & De Wit, 2001). However, no empirical evidence has shown that formal communication is more effective in facilitating employees' OCC than informal communication.

In addition, Arnold and Randall and colleagues (Arnold and Randall, et al., 2010) argue that open communication through different channels, whether formal or informal, at both individual and group levels are important during organizational changes. Equally, applicable in organizational change processes are appropriate communication methods and adequate information about the change itself; with these factors facilitating employees' CCC. Unfortunately, no study has yet looked at CCC in relation to communication patterns. Therefore, this paper proposes that communication and CCC are associated. This proposition is supported by Postmes et al.'s (2001) and Elving's (2005) conceptual models of communication, which suggest that formal communication and informal communication both lead to OC and effective change.

This paper also suggests that formal communication between management and employees about change will have a greater impact on employees' CCC compared to informal communication. The present study is also interested in how the communication method affects the relationship between conscientiousness and OCC.

In summary, this study looks at the effect of conscientiousness on three types of OCC identified by Herscovitch and Meyer (2002). It also examines the impact of formal communication and informal communication on these three types of OCC.

Method

This study applies quantitative research methods with a deductive approach in order to deduce and test the hypotheses supported from previous theoretical frameworks. A positivist philosophical stance is taken to test the significance of hypotheses by controlling various variables.

Participants and procedure

A study invitation was distributed to six hundred and fifty employees from financial teams of an insurance company by email. The invitation contained the purpose and procedure of the present study, and a link to the electronic questionnaire hosted by Qualtrics. The purpose of the study was described as “to explore how organizational change was managed in the company” and participants were asked to follow the instructions provided in the questionnaire.

Informed consent was provided by email prior to participation in the study and participants were reassured that their responses were to be anonymous and confidential, and reminded them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The data was collected over 17 days around the ‘blackout period’ in the organization. The term ‘blackout period’ refers to the busiest time of the year for the financial team due to the releasing of quarterly financial earning information.

Measures

A questionnaire was used to collect data consisting of: seven personality items (taken from the short version of the Big Five Personality Items, Rammstedt & John, 2000), 18 CCC items (taken from Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002), seven communication items

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(taken from Postmes et al., 2001), and demographic questions (age, gender and department).

Response choices were arranged on a five point Likert-type scale, from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Participants were required to respond to each given sentence (such as “I believe in the value of change”).

Analysis

Data obtained from Qualtrics was converted into SPSS format to carry out reliability tests, correlations, factor analysis and multiple regression analyses.

Results

Two hundred and four questionnaires were returned with useable data with a response rate of 31.3%. The response rate is higher than the researcher’s initial expectation given the impact of ‘blackout period’. This will be discussed in the following section.

The 18 items from Herscovitch and Meyer’s (2002) questionnaire of OCC account for 65% of the total variance. No items were moved from the scales because all items had communality greater than .30 suggesting the variables are relatively reliable.

Findings confirm there are three factors of commitment to change as indicated by the Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) model.

With Cronbach’s alphas of .90, .59 and .85 for ACC, NCC and CCC respectively, reliabilities of ACC and CCC are satisfactory. However, results shows that the NCC scale is less reliable when compared to Herscovitch and Meyer’s (2002). This is possibly due to a difference in sample between the studies. The Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) study had a predominantly female population of nurses. However in the present study, participants are employees in a financial institution with an approximately 1:1 gender ratio. The nature of finance work in private sector is very different from the nature of nursing work.

A significant negative correlation was found between conscientiousness and CCC ($r = -.214$, $p < .005$) suggesting employees who have a sense of responsibility toward change are less likely to hold a continuance commitment to change. No significant relationship is found between conscientiousness and the other two commitment factors. Further, there was a significant correlation between CCC and formal communication

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($r = -.407$, $p < .001$) illustrating that employees who perceived change in line with a cost of resistance are less likely to engage in formal communication about change.

A positive relationship between ACC and formal communication ($r = .237$, $p < .001$) suggests that employees who are naturally inclined to change are more likely to participate in formal communication about change.

Finally, a positive relationship between formal and informal communication ($r = .372$, $p < .001$) reveals that people who engage in formal communication about change are more likely to join in an informal conversation about change as well.

The results of multiple-regression analysis (see Table 1) shows a significant improvement after adding formal communication as a predictor for ACC and CCC. This suggests that formal communication is more important when predicting ACC and CCC; but not for NCC or informal communication. Neither formal nor informal communication were found to moderate the relationship between conscientiousness and CCC.

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Table 1. Moderated-regression analysis on formal communication predicting Continuance Commitment to Change from Personality traits (N=178)

Model variables	R2	Adjust R2	ΔF	Sig F change	B	t	p
Predictor variables (constant)					3.007	4.240	.000***
Model 1	.045	.026	2.295	.080			
Proactive					-.001	-.006	.995
Conscientiousness					-.262	-2.274	.024**
Agreeableness					.239	1.722	.107
Model 2	.198	.176	27.438	.000***			
FORC					-4.26	-5.238	.000***
Model 3	.199	.171	.124	.725			
C* FORC					-.047	-.352	.725

Note:

FORC = Formal communication,

C* FORC = Interaction between conscientiousness and formal communication.

**₂, p < .01,

***₃, p < .001

Discussion

This paper aims to inform management to give due consideration to factors such as employee personality and communication methods when planning and implementing organizational change. These findings suggest that formal and informal communication have a significant difference in impact on employees' OCC. Specifically, formal communication is likely to have a more positive impact on employees' commitment to change compared with informal communication. Formal communication exhibits a significant positive association with affective commitment to change and a negative relationship with continuance commitment to change. This finding is in line with Postmes et al. (2001)'s conclusion about the relationship between communication types and OC. The negative relationship between CCC and formal communication indicates that employees who frequently participate in formal communication about change are less likely to associate supporting change with the cost of resistance to change. A powerful cost of not supporting change could be the threat of redundancy if employees do not support change (Bouckennooghe et al., 2015).

Further employees scoring high on conscientiousness are less likely to commit to change because of the perceived costs and risks of not engaging in organizational change. Although previous studies have suggested a positive relationship between ACC and conscientiousness (Panaccio & Vandenberghe, 2012), but, no relationship was found between conscientiousness and ACC in this study, or with NCC. A possible explanation of lack of associations maybe related to the 'blackout period' that the study took place. During this period, the workload for employees in the finance team increased significantly. Here, occupational stress is seen as a response to significant increase in workload which potentially leads to physiological and psychological strain (Beehr & Franz, 1987). As Beehr and Nikolaou (2005) suggest occupational stress directly affects employees OC and OCC. Nevertheless, a lack of association between conscientiousness and the other two components of OCC provoke an urgency to clearly distinguish between OC and OCC.

Additionally, it is worth taking a look at some other findings. A significant positive correlation between formal and informal communication may also indicate a link between different types of communication. It is possible to say that employees who choose to actively communicate with management about change may also be more

likely to engage in informal communication about change with their peers and supervisors. This association also reveals a potential link between using communication as a tool as well as using communication as a social interaction. It is possible that studies specific to communication have shown similar results, however this topic is outside the scope of this study.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have practical implications for management when planning and implementing change. The results confirm the importance of distinguishing employees' different motivations toward change in order to better facilitate change. The results suggest that employees scoring high on conscientiousness are less likely to commit to change based on their estimated cost of not engaging in organizational change. In fact, most graduate recruitment assessments now have personality profiling included during the recruitment process as well as for career development purposes.

Building on previous studies of other personality traits, identification of relationships between personality traits and commitment to change helps management apply suitable change strategies, whether it's through different communication channels or providing information that provoke employees' motivation to change.

Findings indicate formal communication is a better predictor of employees' attitude to change. This suggests formal communication is likely to have a better impact on employees' ACC and CCC. Thus, it is recommended that organizations should apply formal communication as the main channel when communicating about change. However, informal communication should not be neglected just because it did not show as great an impact as formal communication. Postmes et al. (2001) suggest that in a hierarchical organization structure, it is likely that formal communication may have a more significant impact on employees' attitude toward change. However, with an increased focus on team-based projects in modern organizations, the impact of informal communication is likely to increase. Thus, the impact of informal communication should not be neglected when communicating about change.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

There are limitations of this study, including the use of a: a) single self-report measurement; b) cross-sectional study; and c) single occupational group. Nevertheless, these findings show further need for evaluative research to assess the effect of communication methods on OCC during organizational change.

While the present paper confirms the importance of formal communication to OCC, it is worth noting that change was not in progress in the organization during data collection. The absence of change is likely to have created discrepancies between the different changes referred by employees when answering questions (e.g., about structural change or system change). Absence of change makes the comparison of change outcomes based on the application of different communication channels difficult, as no comparison can be made on OCC before and after the change took place. Future research should compare change outcomes with the application of different communication methods before and after change took place to confirm the effect of different communication methods.

Conclusion

This paper investigates the effect of conscientiousness on three types of OCC (Affective, Normative & Continuance) and examines the role that two types of communication play in commitment to change. Findings confirm that there are three components in commitment to change as suggested by Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) with a different occupational group. The study reveals a significant negative association between conscientiousness and continuance commitment to change. In addition, formal communication shows a significant effect on continuance commitment to change. Results also suggest that formal communication is a stronger predictor of affective and continuance commitment to change compared with informal communication.

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